

Available online at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)**ScienceDirect**

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 191 (2015) 447 – 451

**Procedia**  
Social and Behavioral Sciences

WCES 2014

# Citizenship Education – What Geography Teachers Think On The Subject And How They Are Involved?

Maria Esteves \*

*\*Universidade de Lisboa, Instituto de Geografia e Ordenamento do Território, Centro de Estudos Geográficos, Edifício da Faculdade de Letras, Alameda da Universidade, 1600-214, Lisboa, Portugal*

---

## Abstract

This research aims at knowing how Geography teachers are involved in Citizenship education. Portuguese school geography presents itself as a particularly important subject in developing students' awareness about many problems that concern societies worldwide. Thus, it was important to understand Geography teachers' beliefs on the subject when they consider their importance and contribution to citizenship education. The research involved about 180 teachers of secondary schools, and the data were collected through an open questionnaire. Using content analysis methods it was possible to understand teachers' views on the subject of citizenship education and how they position geography curriculum in order to develop practices contributing to citizenship education. Finally, some considerations will be presented about the results of this research.

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license

(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of WCES 2014

**Keywords:** Geography; Education; Citizenship; Teachers

---

## 1. Introduction

The United Nations' agencies have been issuing alerts in terms of the importance of education for social and sustainable development. The *UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005 – 2014)* (UNESCO, 2005) has been setting an educational agenda showing the need to introduce in formal education topics related to the approach of social and environmental issues in order to foster significant learning among students. Many states have

---

\* Maria Esteves. Tel. +351 21 044 30 00 ; fax. +351 21 793 86 90

E-mail address: [me@campus.ul.pt](mailto:me@campus.ul.pt)

signed these activities and are introducing these thematic in school curriculum. Another important challenge for the educational systems of nations of the world has been the need to develop citizenship skills among students. The UNESCO document *Global Citizenship Education: An Emerging Perspective* defends that in a globalized world, it is imperative that learners acquire, not only cognitive knowledge and skills, but also values, attitudes and communication skills as a critical complement (UNESCO, 2013). It is clear the need to promote practices and activities that will foster this idea of citizenship viewed as educating children, from early childhood, to become clear-thinking and enlightened citizens who participate in decisions concerning society; More, *society* is here understood in the special sense of a nation with a circumscribed territory which is recognized as a state (UNESCO, 1998). Having these on mind it was important to learn how Portuguese Geography teachers are involved in Citizenship education. Being a school subject related to Social and Environmental issues, Portuguese school geography presents itself as a subject particularly important in developing a world consciousness about many problems that concern societies worldwide. Its importance in the formation of young students, in terms of understanding the world around them, has been proved by research in different countries. Thus, it was important to understand what Geography teachers believe and what they are doing when they state their importance and contribution to citizenship education. In this paper we present a study about the contribution of Geography teachers to citizenship education. Using qualitative methods of research they were asked about their concept of citizenship education and how they can help their students developed citizenship skills. After a previous exploration of the importance of geography themes in the Portuguese curriculum, the results of the research will attest its importance in promoting citizenship education in Portuguese schools.

## **2. The importance of Geography Education.**

Geography, as a form of knowledge which helps us in the interpretation of the world, is also able to educate us in the understanding of the socioeconomic processes that occur, as well as in the construction of a sense of multi-belonging (Sarno, 2011). This conception of geography is clearly connected to the idea that learning about social and environmental issues in a critical way helps us to understand the complexity of the world around us. Other authors also present interesting perspectives on the subject (Bednarz, Heffron & Huynh, 2013). To these geographers everyone in modern society faces personal decisions that require geographic reasoning. The reason for this is related to the fact that these decisions, such as where to live and how to travel from place to place, can have an enormous impact on one's life. They also consider that these decisions, which may seem insignificant, multiplied by the number of people making them each day, have an enormous cultural, economic, and environmental repercussion for other people and places. So, geographical reasoning is a constant on people's life. And there is a relation between everyday decisions and geographical issues. The importance of Geography education is also recognized by Portuguese geographers, both researchers and teachers. Some researches (Cachinho, 2000) have shown that school geography has an important role in terms of creating learning experiences that will promote geography skills that involve cognitive skills, social and participation skills. Thus he considers that learning geography has become very important for young students because geography is everywhere and allows people to understand the nature and interrelation of different phenomena, ranging from understanding the changes in oil prices in the Gulf, the depletion of the Amazon rainforest, climate change in a global level or the growth of urbanization and its impacts on human life. Through geography students learn to read the world, to understand the place they live in and are given the tools to start acting in a critical and coherent way. More recently other researchers refer that the development of social competencies and an effective practice of citizenship is an important concern for educational geographers (Esteves, 2010). The development of a geographic reasoning allows young students to identify social problems, and think about common strategies of problem solving. In fact, any consideration of citizenship education has to be related to the development of analytical skills about physical, human and economic problems at different scales. And this is the important contribution of the geographical approach.

## **3. Methodology of research and data analysis**

The research involved about 180 geography teachers from different levels of schooling being the majority from secondary school (13 – 15 year old students) where the subject is compulsory in the Portuguese curriculum. In terms

of gender the sample included a distribution of 27% of male teachers and 73% of female teachers. About 52, 5% of the teachers were aged between 41 and 50 years old. And 47, 4% of the teachers were in the profession for about 11 to 29 years. The data were collected through an open questionnaire where teachers were asked what is “Citizenship Education”. The option for this kind of data collection is justified by the fact that it is important to encourage teachers to clarify their views on the subject as much as possible. More, an open question always allows new topic areas not initially considered. In fact, an open questionnaire gives people the possibility to think and reflect about the proposed issue and also is a good way to get teachers’ opinions and feelings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). The data were analyzed through descriptive content analyses trying to conciliate description and interpretation, in order to obtain a good reading of teacher’s point of view. In fact, the most important was to understand the representation of the questioned on the subject (Bardin, 2008). By using a qualitative methodology of data collection, it was implicit to obtain the subjective views of the teachers. The data were then organized trying to summarize teachers’ perceptions.

#### **4. Geography teachers’ views on Citizenship Education: what they think on the subject and how they are involved?**

The content analyses of teachers’ views on citizenship education has shown some important ideas that are very important in education and go beyond subject knowledge. We present some of these ideas, related to how Geography teachers perceive citizenship education. Geography teachers believe that citizenship education is about:

- Developing values, attitudes and social skills;
- Being aware of Rights and Duties as citizens;
- Respecting themselves, others and the environment;
- Developing skills related to participation, cooperation and free expression;
- Social integration in a critical and creative way;
- Developing a sense of belonging to the local, national and global community;

It is important to say that in the Portuguese school curriculum there is no subject related to citizenship education. Somehow, all subjects should work this transversal content through subject knowledge and activities. In what Geography teachers are concerned, they consider that citizenship education is clearly related to the nature of the issues and activities related to Geography education. This fact is clear when concepts such as environmental concern and local, national and global communities are mentioned. Learning geography is learning about the world in what concerns people and their impact on the environment. Learning geography is also being able to relate geographical events and analyze them in different scales.

For Geography teachers involving their students in activities related to citizenship education means creating learning experiences where certain citizenship skills can be developed:

- Education for Respect;
- Education for Participation;
- Education for Integration;
- Values Education;
- Development Education;
- Education for Diversity;
- Education for Rights and Duties;
- Education for different scales of citizenship participation;

School geography is committed to the formation of young citizens according to the official syllabus (DEB, 2002). This is the nature of the subject in the researched years of schooling. So, the discourse of teachers is close to the aims of the subject. It was important then to know a bit more about how teachers integrate this concern in their practices. Teachers work citizenship skills in different topics of school geography. The most important one is *Population and its patterns* selected by almost 60% of the teachers. According the curricular guidelines of school geography within this thematic, teachers go through different aspects of population studies:

- Population in the world: patterns of location;

- Migrations: causes and consequences;
- Cultural diversity;
- Urbanization of the world population;

Adding to the issues developed by teachers, it is important to mention the basic skills related to the nature of geographical work: location of places or phenomena, relations between places or phenomena and the dynamic interrelation among places and phenomena. All these issues have the possibility to be addressed in a multiplicity of scales ranging from local to global. More, in geography education the relation between society and nature and the emerging conflicts that arise from it, make geographical knowledge very important in what concerns addressing problems that are also citizenship problems. And teachers recognize it conceptually when they are asked about the contribution of geographical education to citizenship education. Thinking geographically is clearly an important step in understanding the local, regional and global phenomena. Doing this work in school Geography allows developing citizenship skills that one day may be used in a more active participation in society. And this active participation includes a good knowledge of how society and environment are connected, and being able to critically solve problems. Geography education, through real problem solving is a good context to learn exercising citizenship participation. And geography teachers recognize this important relation.

## 5. Final considerations

Going back to the idea of Citizenship education defended by the UNESCO for the 21st Century (UNESCO, 1998), it is important to recall the three main objectives that it must pursue:

- educating people in citizenship and human rights through an understanding of the principles and institutions (which govern a state or nation);
- learning to exercise one's judgment and critical faculty;
- and acquiring a sense of individual and community responsibilities;

Students in general must be prepared to be active citizens. That is the sense of having a compulsory educational system. Still, we live in times characterized by many challenges and education itself is involved in this challenge. The main challenge in Portugal is the discourse about what education should be. Over the decades governments have been changing the teaching goals of different subjects by consecutive curricular reforms. In 2013 a new reform is being implemented changing the nature of school work for transversal and specific competences to a range of learning objectives easier to measure. The importance of rankings and evaluation is now the most important concern. Citizenship education remains a transversal subject and all school subjects must contribute to the development of citizenship skills. Still, for teachers this is very difficult to conciliate with a certain number of contents that are now the main concern in the classroom. Subject contents are in the core of teachers' work. For geography teachers, due to the nature of geography contents, it is always possible to include in the class relevant tasks related to citizenship education. But, it is important to remember that the purpose of geography education is now to make sure that students learn a stipulated number of contents, about which they will be assessed. And by the assessment of students, teachers are also being assessed. This change in the nature of what school should be centered, has shifted the nature of school work. Another important consideration that arises from this research is about the kind of *citizens* our schools are preparing. We live in times where the changes are quick and unpredictable. Change is a constant and that poses a challenge to Geography education. It is very important to understand that social, physical and economic phenomena have uneven impacts on different places and it is very important to help young people understand this. Even geographical knowledge is not fixed. Maybe contents are important, if they are relevant to understanding the world. But skills are the knowledge in action that students should start exercising at school (Butt, 2010). Finally, there is the need to close this gap between society and school. What happens in school should be a preparation to social integration. Our research intended to understand how Geography teachers do it. We have learned their views on citizenship education and the geography contents that are usually used to develop citizenship skills. But, the educational strategy is asking teachers to be more concerned with the teaching and somehow devalue the learning...

## References

- Bardin, L. (2008). *Análise de conteúdo*. Lisboa: Edições 70
- Bednarz, S.W., Heffron, S., & Huynh, N.T. (Eds.). (2013). A road map for 21st century geography education: Geography education research (A report from the Geography Education Research Committee of the Road Map for 21st Century Geography Education Project). Washington, DC: *Association of American Geographers*
- Bogdan, R. C. & Biklen, S. K. (2006). *Qualitative research in education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Allyn & Bacon
- Butt, G. (2010). Geography, Education and the Future: perspectives on geography education in English schools. *Association of American Geographers' Conference*, Washington, 14-18 April 2010
- Cachinho, H. (2000). Geografia Escolar: orientação teórica e praxis didáctica. *Inforgeo*, N.º 15, pp. 69-90
- DEB (2002). *Orientações curriculares de Geografia – 3º ciclo*. Lisboa : Departamento da Educação Básica
- Esteves, M.H. (2012). Geography Education and Citizenship Education in Portugal. *Sage Open*, Dec. 2012, Vol. 2 (1)
- Sarno, E. (2011). Geography and Citizenship Education: Migrations and Pathways of Educational Research. *Review of International Geographical Education Online* © RIGEO Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 2011
- UNESCO (1998) *Citizenship Education for the 21st Century*. France: Paris
- UNESCO (2005). *UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005 – 2014)*. France:Paris
- UNESCO (2013). *Global Citizenship Education: An Emerging Perspective*. France: Paris